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Measuring literalism and symbolism in advertisements: scale development and validation.

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ABSTRACT

A basic element in advertising strategy is the choice of an appeal. Many researchers have studied communication message form and specifically forms of literalism and symbolism, or some variation. The motives for such study are grounded in increasing the effectiveness of commercial communication messages, especially advertising messages. Advertising research studies typically use forms of literalism (e.g. *informativeness*) or symbolism (e.g. *metaphoric, tropes, schemes figures of speech, and rhetorical figures*) as independent variables and compare these against one or more of the traditional advertising effectiveness measures as dependent variable(s). The main challenge in assessing the effectiveness of literalism or symbolism in message content is the discreet identification of the construct. However, no standard, empirically-tested measure was located in the literature.

The purpose of this research was to address that gap. To achieve that goal, three specific objectives were set: (1) to identify underlying structures and dimensionality of literalism and symbolism, (2) to develop a scale that measures literalism and symbolism in a reliable, valid and generalizable way and (3) to develop a model that tests the way the scale operates when applied different respondents and across different ad executions.

The science of marketing research dictates rigorous processes and procedures for development of measures to adequately quantify the construct of interest: literalism-symbolism. First, uni-dimensionality was established, before moving to a comprehensive process of testing and retesting suitable reflective indicators of the latent construct. Alternative scale measures were evaluated to determine the most suitable format to tap literalism-symbolism. The literature revealed that the use of adjectives to evaluate message content was adopted by many advertising researchers (Aaker and Bruzzone 1981; Aaker and Norris 1982; Burton and Lichtenstein 1988; Ducoffe and Curlo 2000; Holbrook and Batra 1987; Leavitt 1970; Wells et al. 1971) in assessing dimensions of advertising messages. For these reasons, the semantic differential was examined as a means of capturing distinct dimensions of literalism and symbolism in message content. These studies and others established strong support for the use of a semantic differential approach. As such, it was deemed an appropriate measurement tool and the research borrowed from a number of sources in compiling a list of suitable adjectives.

By following the eight-step framework proposed by DeVellis (2003), scale development was systematic and rigorous; from initial review of the item pool by a panel of experts, testing selecting items with a development sample, to validation of scale items in a confirmatory study. This resulted in a one-factor 5-item solution. Exploratory and confirmatory factor analysis provided evidence of an acceptable uni-dimensional construct measurement for literalism-symbolism.

The model was tested further using a series invariance tests. Observed differences in model fit for each ad example suggested potential variance existed between the sample populations (academics and industry practitioners). In other words, indicators of the latent construct (literalism-symbolism) may have different meanings for the two groups, suggesting the measurement model would only hold when used by particular individuals. The analytic procedures utilized showed that the scale was interpreted and applied in the same way by both groups and across the different executions.

The process used in scale development confirms the robustness of the DeVellis approach and contributes to the literature by providing a helpful model for future researchers using factor analysis to construct a measurement scale. Further insights are also offered to other researchers interested in establishing uni-dimensionality of a construct and in the design of a semantic differential scale. To this end, the scale offers communication researchers a robust instrument, proven to reliably measure levels of literalism-symbolism in advertisements under varying conditions.

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